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Abstract

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Emerging authorships and organizational authority in network organizations: the case of Wikipedia

Sub-theme 42: The Communicative Constitution of Organizations: Organizations as Precarious Accomplishments

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Introduction

“Who is responsible for what” in organizations where there is no formal organizational chart? To explore this issue, the article focuses on the famous online encyclopedia Wikipedia, considering it as an organizing process (Weick, 1980) constituted through communication (see: Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009). On Wikipedia, decisions are made but nobody has a formal mandate to achieve them. Decisions thus results from negotiations between contributors¹. Consequently, to uncover the micro-processes that composes the everyday organizational life on Wikipedia, one must know who has the legitimacy to speak – that is, the *authority* - and how is he acting to do so – that is, the *authorship*.

I first review the literature specific to governance on Wikipedia; then, I examine the concepts of *authority* (Benoit-Barne & Cooren, 2009; Limerick, 1976; Luhman, 2006) in organizational contexts where there is no formal hierarchy and this of *author* (Barthes, 1968; Bennett, 2005; Compagnon, 2002; Foucault, 1969) to set the conditions of an *organizational*

¹ In this article, the words "contributor", "Wikipedian" or "user" are considered synonymous. They mean any actor who writes articles or participate in organizational processes.

author (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2003; Shotter, 1993). The relevance of such a concept is then experienced through the analysis of the creation, between 2010 and 2012, of one significant rule on the French Wikipedia. From eleven narrative interviews with the most involved contributors, I extract several authority figures that I contrast with the concept of organizational author. The analysis allows to answer the question of the initiative in non-hierarchical organizations; it also shows how an organizational self is built through communication (Taylor & Van Every, 2010). I consider that blackboxing governance phenomenon's on Wikipedia is needed (it is claimed on the website that *nobody* leads the project²!) to ensure the perception of the project as a well-defined whole, a *thirdness* (Taylor & Van Every, 2010) owned by the mass of contributors, despite the various voices involved in the organizational processes (Robichaud, Giroux, & Taylor, 2004; Schneider, 2012). To conclude, I suggest some parallels between organizational authors and institutional entrepreneurship (Czarniawska, 2009).

Wikipedia, a decentralized project where everybody is leading?

Many adjectives referring to a “non-hierarchic” organization have been used to characterize Wikipedia, describing it in terms of participation (Bryant, Forte, & Bruckman, 2005; Cardon & Levrel, 2009; Kriplean, Beschastnikh, McDonald, & Golder, 2007; Levrel, 2006) or cooperation (Auray & Paris, 2007; Benkler, 2006; B. Grassineau, 2006; Jacquemin, Lauf, Poudat, Hurault-Plantet, & Auray, 2008; Wilkinson & Huberman, 2007). Wikipedia is supposed to be self-managed (Beschastnikh, Kriplean, & McDonald, 2008; Joyce, Pike, & Butler, 2012; Spek, 2006) while some researchers emphasized the decentralization of the ruling processes (Arazy, Morgan, & Patterson, n.d.; Forte & Bruckman, 2008). The autopoiesis system of Wikipedia corresponds to what Diefenbach & Sillince (2011) call “network organizations³”. Although the word “network” might be confusing, it designates organizations composed of “fully decentralized entities comprising (seemingly) truly autonomous, self-directed and participative units” (Diefenbach & Sillince, 2011). The authors also point out that informal hierarchy is prevailing in these organizations.

When the first scholarly works on Wikipedia emerged⁵, there had already been a wide consensus about auto-organization features of the online encyclopedia (Viegas, Wattenberg, Kriss, & Van Ham, 2007). More recently, some researchers bridging online and offline communities kept on concluding to an increased decentralization of powers (Bryant et al.,

² See: http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aide:FAQ/lecteurs#Qui_dirige_Wikip.C3.A9dia_.3F

³ In the following article, “network organization” and “horizontal organization” are used interchangeably.

⁵ For a full literature review on Wikipedia, see (Martin, 2011)

2005; Forte & Bruckman, 2008; Forte, Larco, & Bruckman, 2009). They especially highlighted the role played by collectively built rules, partly connected to formal status (e.g. administrators) whose concern grow as the encyclopedia becomes larger (Derthick et al., 2011). On Wikipedia, frequent editors⁶ dominate what people see on articles (Laniado & Tasso, 2011; Priedhorsky et al., 2007), hence frequent editors would also dominate rule building and organizational work. Who are they? Reagle (2007) offered interesting insights about leadership on Wikipedia, unfolding specific features of the latter, but he focused on individual actions only. Highlighting the significance of individual actions, Reagle implicitly addresses a first revision to the fully participative model of governance on Wikipedia: participation has its limitations since only few people can self-manage.

Exploring the ruling processes is thus a good way to understand how actors organize to make decisions. Actually, wikis technical platforms are very well designed to support rules and policies (Butler, Joyce, & Pike, 2008). Ambiguities in these policies give rise to power plays (Kriplean et al., 2007) which are potent but assessed with difficulty. The collaborative creation of new rules is a bureaucratic answer (Butler et al., 2008) to the problem of any pseudo-democratic system: How to manage situations that necessarily imply conflicts between contributors who have to collaborate, especially if one takes into account the emotional aspects (Laniado, 2012)? Grassineau (2012) showed that, ideologically, Wikipedia might illustrate what Feyerabend calls democratic relativism: in one hand, rules should not be binding; on the other hand everybody is expected to take part in the discussion (Lejeune, 2011).

But, who is *everybody*? Benkler (2006) points out that the Babel objection suits very well to the so-called democratic potential of the Internet: “If everyone can speak, no one can be heard”. In fact, everybody *does not* speak in horizontal organizations, but *some* do. Consequently, to answer the question “who’s responsible for what?”, one must know who is legitimate to build rules and make decisions, that is: “who has the authority?”. Weber (1971) asserted that people who have the means and the legitimacy to take decisions in one organization *dominate* other actors. To Weber, *authority* and *dominance* are synonyms while they would be inescapable historical phenomenon’s (Warner, 2007). Thus, fundamentally, authority is asymmetric and implies subordination (Charmettant, 2012). However, as soon as authority is needed to make decisions, the situation of horizontal organizations appear

⁶ An « editor » is a Wikipedian making an « edit », that is, who makes a modification on a Wikipedia page.

paradoxical: Either, there is actually no authorities, but then decisions cannot be taken; either, there are relationships of authority but then the organization is not horizontal. This paradox shows that the traditional view of authority is not relevant to deeply understand shaded processes in collaborative organization. We lack a concept of authority that would be flexible enough to embrace and solve the paradox.

As there is no status which justifies authority in horizontal organizations, authority in those contexts is effective only when embodied in action, that is, in the inscription of organizational texts. I call “authorship” this work of inscription and suggest to prefer the concept of *author* to this of *authority*. Starting from the distinction between *the author* and *the authority*, I uncover in the next paragraphs what kind of reconciliation is needed.

Authority in horizontal organizations

Authority in hierarchical context has been widely investigated and might be defined as the “fundamental organizational answer to systemic needs for control and coordination” (Limerick, 1976). Weber (1971) pointed out three kind of legitimate authorities. In *traditional authority*, the validity of habits and tradition is prevailing and the sacred character of the chief is emphasized. There is little chance to find traditional authorities in network organizations insofar as the participative processes *a priori* prevents from any sacralization of one or another actor: if everybody is equal, no one can claim an “immemorial” status. Charismatic authority is the second weberian legitimate authority. It is based on the belief in exceptional abilities of an individual. Yet, participation and charisma sound distant from each other: charisma supposes an unquestioned leadership while participation means decentralization of powers. The rational-legal authority is the third type that Weber outlined (Weber, 1971). He stressed that the significance of this authority had risen, compared to the two other types. According to Luhman (2006), the rational-legal authority implies a clear hierarchy, as well as “a clear level of individual competence and fixed salaries, career and promotion opportunities, and separation of ownership”. Not surprisingly, this type does not correspond to horizontal organizations that are, per se, non-hierarchical and that imply no career nor promotion.

Luhman (2000) conducted a narrative examination of the literature on labor-managed firms to discover the nature of what he calls “organization democracy”. From this research, he suggests a fourth form of legitimate authority, the “rational-collective” legitimate authority (Luhman, 2006, p. 179):

“Its authority is derived from the consensus of the governed (i.e., the ideal of democracy) and from the attempt to fulfill the utopian images of anarchism, liberalism, radicalism, and conservatism. Anarchism promotes the capacity of spontaneous enlightenment of individuals. Liberalism promotes the capacity of reason. Radicalism promotes the capacity to view oppression and to align oneself with the interests of other workers. Conservatism promotes accountability and efficiency in the production process.” (Luhman, 2006)

Luhman (2006) placed his new type on a two-dimension square that comprises the three other weberian legitimate authorities. The first dimension is based on the ideal type of decision-making process and the second one is based on the ideal type of staff selection process. Consequently, the rational-collective legitimate authority would represent the ideal of democracy: staff is selected for intrinsic qualities while decisions are made on the basis of rules (Luhman, 2006). Wikipedia organizing fits quite well to this last type: reason remains critical in all different organizational processes while deep involvement of some actors can be explained by their greater motivation. Thus, like similar organizations based on rational-collective authority, Wikipedia:

- Gives access to every organizational information and Wikipedians “gain skills to deal with that information” (Luhman, 2006)
- Wikipedians have a “sense of solidarity with the needs of the community” (Luhman, 2006). I will return later to the term “community” that is widely used by the contributors in the negotiations.
- Contributors have “control over their work tasks” which are varied (Luhman, 2006).
- There are systems to protect individuals from abuses (see, for example, the contestation of administrators⁹).
- Some contributors practice organizational routines that require skills and knowledge (i.e. “la patrouille RC”¹⁰).
- Individuals must “act with tolerance and respect for minority and/or dissenting views” (Luhman, 2006) – see, for example, the “WP:FOI” rule on Wikipedia which states that each contributor must assume that his partner is in good faith.

⁹

http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikip%C3%A9dia:Prise_de_d%C3%A9cision/Administrateur/Contestation_du_statut

¹⁰ See: http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikip%C3%A9dia:Patrouille_RC

However, Luhman does not say how the coherence is maintained in such organizations. To answer this question, I propose to refer to the Limerick's definition of *Integrated Systems Organizations* (Limerick, 1976). These organizations are "composed of individuals and groups with their own needs and goals" but whose "conflicts of interest are worked through in the pursuit of integrative commons goals, norms and values" (Limerick, 1976). In these systems, conflict resolution procedures are major. We will see later that the creation of a new rule on Wikipedia achieves this need of integration insofar as the debate commits the organization itself. The new procedure aims to solve conflicts but also allows contributors to collectively redefine the boundaries of the organization. Thus, participation (e.g. to the creation of a rule) proves to be sufficient to create a "self" (Taylor & Van Every, 2010) because beyond what is negotiated, the entire organization is negotiated. If each person has, potentially, the power to decide, the coherence that is provided by the management in traditional organizations becomes a shared priority in *Integrated Systems Organizations*. It shows how *authority* and *organization identity* are strongly coupled.

The Limerick's concept of *Integrated Systems Organization* (Limerick, 1976) and the Luhman's new type of legitimate authority (Luhman, 2006) offer an interesting theoretical framework for understanding the mechanisms of authority in horizontal organizations like Wikipedia. However, we still do not know *how* it works in the day-to-day interactions. To unravel decisions-making processes, I now turn to those who do inscribe the organization and who are thus responsible for the organizing authorship: the organizational authors.

The author

According to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the word "author" usually refers to the source of some form of intellectual or creative work. It is from Latin "auctor" which means the creator and/or the person responsible for a work. Thus, looking for authors in an organizational context means considering contributors who effectively do "inscribe" the organizing process through the building of rules, the management of conflicts, the agenda setting, etc. The relevance of authorship is supported by the idea that « achieving authority involves the inscription of artifacts or texts to make the organization [...] present in the ongoing interaction [...] » (Benoit-Barne & Cooren, 2009). Inscription of texts might be considered as the place where *authors* negotiate *authority* (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). The concept of author is salient for the analysis of horizontal organizations because it focuses on the personal responsibility and initiatives of actors without reference to any status. Nevertheless, authorship encompasses other dimensions that I want to review firstly.

In the sixties, two French literary critics wrote about the “author” just one year apart. The Roland Barthes’s *“Death of the author”* (Barthes, 1968) and the Michel Foucault’s *“What is an author?”* (Foucault, 1969) were built on the very post-structuralist idea (Bennett, 2005) that the usual focus on the author (and on his intentions) would not prove to be the appropriate lens to apprehend literary works. Barthes and Foucault thought that the meaning of a text had to be found in the text itself. On the contrary, intentionnalists considered that the meaning of a text corresponds to what the author wants to say. That is the reason why context is so important for them (Compagnon, 2002). In another famous article titled *“Intentional fallacy”*, Wimsatt and Beardsley (1962) show why focusing on intention is irrelevant to study literary works. One of their arguments states that:

“If the poet succeeded in doing [his poem], then the poem itself shows what he was trying to do. And if the poet did not succeed, then the poem is not adequate evidence, and the critic must go outside the poem—for evidence of an intention that did not become effective in the poem.” (Jr & Beardsley, 1962, p.1)

Indeed, if the critic must go “outside the poem”, he is no longer studying the poem. However, even in its most radical form, post-structuralism never really excludes the concept of intention – recognizing at least the desired consistency of one text. Compagnon (2002) suggested to distinguish “*meaning*” and “*signification*”¹¹ to answer the problem. The “*meaning*” designates what remains stable in a text over time – corresponding to the question: *what does the text say?* The “*signification*” reveals the differences in the way the text is understood over time, depending on the readers, the context, etc. – or *How valuable is it?* The meaning is much closer to the author’s intention but as the transdiscursive situation is changing, text begins to act by itself, strengthened or weakened, highlighted or forgotten by other arguments. Barthes was the most radical about the “intention” issue: *“Writing means the destruction of every voice, every origin.”*¹² (Barthes, 1968). He meant that the text survives his author insofar as it continues to act (Cooren, 2010a) despite the physical absence of the author (including death) (Bennett, 2005). That is why Foucault asks the question: *“No matter who’s speaking?”*¹³ But Foucault is less categorical than Barthes ; in his essay, he considers the concept of author as a certain “functional principle” in our culture that “includes, excludes and chooses”. In other words, the *author* does insure the perceived coherence of one text.

¹¹ My translation. Compagnon (2002) uses the French words “sens” and “signification”.

¹² Our translation into English.

¹³ Our translation into English

From an organizational point of view, this would mean that organizational texts are legitimate because their origin looks consistent – texts (like rules, charts, decisions, etc.) have been *authored* by managers who take the responsibility for them.

According to Barthes (1968), there is a need for an author especially in environments that value individuals. Hence, one question still remains: how is it that texts in horizontal organizations are perceived as coherent pieces whereas multiple authors are responsible for them and voices have been anonymized? Moreover, the author's figure plays a role in the case of texts that are meant to act directly on the real (Barthes, 1968). Organizational texts like rules, charts, etc. are such texts. Following Barthes (1968), their *authority* should be then *a priori* reduced since their origin is unclear. In addition, the author is a respected figure: he is not only *read* but also *believed* (Compagnon, 2002).

The ambivalent status of the author's disappearance, however, enhances the text agency (Barthes, 1968; Compagnon, 2002; Cooren, 2010a; Foucault, 1969): The supposed intention hidden behind a text has no power compared to the effective action of what is written. Any organizational text can be quoted out of context and its meaning will be transformed, updated or strengthened. This is especially true in organizations like Wikipedia where everybody has access to archives and history of discussions. As the charismatic figure of the author is desacralized with the multiplicity of voices (there is not a single creator like a novelist in literature), the birth of one author strictly corresponds to the production of each singular text - while his being never precedes or exceeds his writing (Foucault, 1969). The resulting text is built on the compromise between several *writings* whose authority does not depend on individual authors but on a anonymized authorship. In this sense, Foucault (1969) says that the disappearance of the author brings up a writing without closure principle ; in organizational words, I would say: *a never ending organizing process*.

So, under what conditions would an *organizational author* appear? And under what conditions does he disappear to make way for an anonymous discourse?

- According to Barthes, an author carries out a project (Barthes, 1968). At the beginning, the intentions of the organizational author are influential. They are tangible in the form of arguments in negotiations. Of course, different authors will back different ideas.

- Authorship occurs in a transdiscursive situation (Foucault, 1969) where texts respond to previous texts and become the origin of new ones. This is precisely where conversation takes place (Robichaud et al., 2004).
- The organizational author is responsible for his writings and the guarantor of his integrity. He can be punished if he does not follow the rules of the organization.
- In accordance with the etymology of the word, the author is valued as an individual and thus for his personal initiatives (Barthes, 1968; Foucault, 1969).
- Consistency between multiple interventions of one author is expected as well as a closure principle (Barthes, 1968; Foucault, 1969).

Following these items, the author would make way for an organizational discourse as soon as one text reflects (or is the compromise of) different points of view ; secondly, the resulting text is no more transdiscursive but it is still subject to renegotiation (there is no closure of meaning in that extent that it is a “*never ending process*”) ; finally, the organization as a whole is responsible for it, which means that the collective is more valued than the individual.

We have seen that authority supposes inscription of texts by organizational authors. The author’s intentions are not a decisive issue for the organization because (1) texts survive the authors ; (2) authors’ intentions are diluted in all other voices. The author is not the purpose of a text but is needed to its creation – this attitude contrasts with that of intentionnalists: they assert that the text can only be understood by understanding the author. Barthes (1968) said that texts are grounded on a radical intertextuality of writings, a “tissue of quotes”. Hence, the *death of the author* would be sublimated by the birth of a new text that would have solved its own internal tensions and contradictions. However, if one author ensures the consistency of his own text, the organizational text finally *authored* has, paradoxically, *no more* authors. In the following sections, I will reconcile the concepts of authority and authorship to show how a text without author seems nevertheless legitimate to the involved actors.

Reconciling authority and authorship

Authority and authorship share the same etymology. The root “*author-*” comes from the Latin “*auctor*” and the verb “*augeo*” which firstly designated “*to promote*”. Thus, the *author* is the person who *promotes, takes an initiative, guarantees, founds* (Compagnon, 2002). The authority of the author is unquestioned: the author is the person who directs, regulates and controls (Bennett, 2005) by being in action. Action is therefore inherent to the idea of authority (Benoit-Barne & Cooren, 2009).

Thus, authority and authorship are much closer than we might think. It allows to consider the relationship of authority regardless the status of the actors. In his book “*Conversational realities*”, John Shotter (1993) is the first scholar who identifies the manager as a practical author. Emphasizing his critical role during a crisis, Shotter asserts that the role of a manager consists in the reformulation of what becomes, for other stakeholders, chaotic (Shotter, 1993). The manager, involved in a sensemaking process (Weick, 1995), is the one who restores the meaning. Cooren & Fairhurst (2003) sees this sensemaking process as an act of translation (Akrich, Callon, & Latour, 2006) which is only possible through *narratives*. The manager-narrator tells stories to make sense. Shotter also notes that the reformulation is essentially linguistic (Shotter, 1993): managers and stakeholders *organize* by using rhetorical resources (Cunliffe, 2001).

This perspective implies that any situation let the manager with some leeway to impact the blended reality of the organizing. However, those scholars still consider traditional organizations where the responsibilities depend on a formal hierarchy. On the contrary, responsibilities are diluted in horizontal organizations. The answer to the question “Who is responsible for what” in such organizations imply two kind of answers:

- First, through successive phases of *authorships*, that is textualization and recontextualization (Hardy, 2011) of arguments, organizational authors build legitimate texts.
- Second, the organization is materialized in conversations through the agents’ capacity to speak on its name (Benoit-Barné & Cooren, 2009) while the authority of an organizational text is guaranteed because it speaks on the name of the various involved authors. The anonymized authors are then replaced by an implicit generic author which corresponds to the univocal collective organization. The resulting circular process can be described as follows: actors are responsible for organizational texts that guide actors initiatives.

In the next sections, I apply the concept of authorship to the analysis of the co-construction of a specific rule on the French Wikipedia.

Embedding schemes as an analytical tool to unravel authority

The following analysis applies the concept of organizational authorship to the building of a rule and explore the proposition of author’s disappearance in organizational texts. Consequently, there are two main objectives: first, the search for authority figures as they are

expressed by the contributors to Wikipedia and, among them, these who take responsibilities (*authors*); second, the apprehension of the mechanisms that give authority to an organizational text without authors.

Access to every discussion (named “talk” on Wikipedia) is opened on Wikipedia. It represents scarce opportunity for the researcher. I have observed organizational procedures but also day-to-day conversations on the French Wikipedia for two years, between April and August 2012. Then, I conducted eleven narrative interviews (Czarniawska, 2004) of Wikipedians¹⁴ who took responsibilities in the creation of a new rule that proved to be significant for the community. To examine authority relationships, I collected their version of this event. In so doing, I focused on how actors perceived the chain of agency: *Who* take initiatives? According to *what* rule? *Who* are the recurrent *organizational actors*? Are *majority votes* more crucial than personal initiative? Etc. This part of the analysis investigates the co-construction process of a generic text in a network organization. CCO approaches (See: Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009) will help discussing the results.

A narrative report provides a crucial insight on the co-construction of the organizing in interaction (Giroux & Marroquin, 2005) because it focuses on the processes and, consequently, on the links between events, that is, the emplotment (Czarniawska, 2004; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1999). It enables self-reflexivity, a retrospective exercise that allows actors to make sense of what generally remains unquestioned. Stories radically differ from discourses inasmuch as it starts from personal experience. The subjectivity is needed to identify the non-linear nature of responsibilities in decision-taking processes in organizations where statutes are not fixed in advance. For the purpose of the analysis, I thus propose to build schemes that display authority embedment and keep intact the emplotment.

This approach is based on the conception of authority distinguishing *agent* and *principal* (Benoit-Barne & Cooren, 2009, p.9):

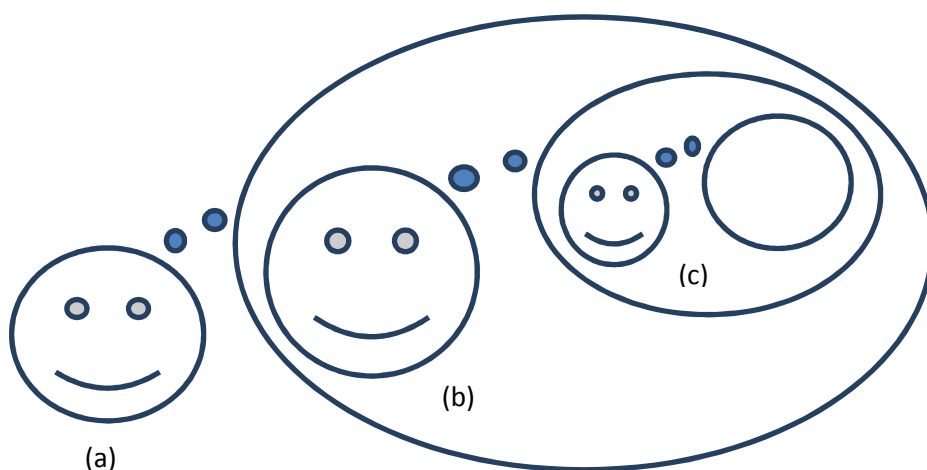
“As Taylor and Van Every (2000) remind us, one way to use the term agent consists of pointing out that the latter acts for a principal, that is, that when he, she, or it performs an action X, it is also the principal he, she, or it represents that should be considered as performing X.”

¹⁴ According to Czarniawska (2004), narrative interviews display “chronological relations of events that occurred during a specified period of time”.

However, the agent/principal relation is a two-step process. I suggest going a stage beyond: authority would embed several agent/principal relations. In other words, the *principal* would also be an agent that acts for a *second* principal which could call for a *third* principal, and so on...until the narrative closure specific to authorship. Here we see that narratives precisely keep this “embedment/emplotment” intact: narrating the story that happened in the organization, one actor will put into words the responsibilities taken by different agents/principals, according to his particular point of view. Division between agent and principal is then essentially relative, mutually defined (Benoit-Barne & Cooren, 2009), and contextual.

The same kind of schemes are used in narratology. Adapted from the theory of mind – that is the assumption that people try to guess intentions and to understand what other people mean as they are communicating (Baron-Cohen, 1991) – the “socio-cognitive complexity” (Zunshine, 2012) asserts that one reader’s empathy (a) is made possible because s/he attributes intentions to a character (b) who, in a similar process, attributes intentions to other characters (c), etc. pointing out embedded mental states – a mind in a mind in a mind, etc.

Fig.1



Although I am not focusing on intentions but on authored actions, it is important to highlight that the narrative report is specific to each actor and thus corresponds to one cognitive reading, that is, how did actors perceive, memorize and rationalize the process to make a story from it. The analysis consists in an interpretation of these stories.

Interviewed Wikipedians describe actions that require a certain power, that is, actors have to be *legitimate* (Suchman, 1995). I define an actor through his ability to directly or indirectly change the organization. An actor might be one contributor but also a collective - also called an “intermental unit” (Zunshine, 2012) which gathers several contributors. Non-humans like bots¹⁵, rules, policies or any other texts (Akrich et al., 2006) also fit to the definition of an *actor* (Greimas (1973) uses the term of *actant*), meaning that they are all inscriptions *doing things* (Cooren, 2004, 2010b).

Because authority is shared, some actors described by my interviewees become more powerful than others (Benoit-Barne & Cooren, 2009). For each organizational action, I identify these actors, keeping intact their embedded relationship. Three different levels appear relevant for the purpose of the analysis: the first level reflects the cognitive reading of the interviewee (it fits to the narrating situation, e.g. the time of the interview) ; the second level brings up the main authority figure ; other levels show the secondary actors involved in the action.

Case study: A rule to contest administrators on Wikipedia

An administrator on Wikipedia is elected by the community to provide maintenance of articles through technical tools. The most crucial actions allowed by this special status are the following:

- Protecting pages: an administrator has the authority to prevent an article from edition in case of recurrent vandalism¹⁷ or in case of conflict between contributors. Protecting pages must be exceptional since the openness of the encyclopedia is a trademark.
- Administrators are the only contributors entitled to edit protected pages. They play a central role on articles about current events where vandals add wrong material while many other contributors try to share relevant information. Sometimes, edits must be posted on the talk page first. An administrator then might decide to add the information to the article. For instance, the 2011 Tohoku earthquake article on the English Wikipedia was protected the first few days. Only administrators could modify the main page.
- Administrators can also delete new articles (SI¹⁸) that do not respect admissibility criteria (CAA¹⁹). Usually, this tool is used in case of vandalism but, depending on the

¹⁵ More information about bots here: <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikip%C3%A9dia:Bot>

¹⁷ Vandalism on Wikipedia designates “any addition, removal, or change of content in a *deliberate* attempt to compromise the integrity of Wikipedia”. See: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Vandalism>

interpretation of the CAA – considered as a formal rule or as a recommendation –, some administrators may delete articles without consensus²⁰.

- Another tool allows administrators to block one contributor convicted of vandalism.

Most administrative tools are used against “vandals”. The few others should be used after a consensus has been found. Hence, an administrator is not supposed to act for editorial reasons. However, some contributors still consider that administrative status confers power. The issue was recurrent within the conversations on the website as well as in the narrative reports of the Wikipedians I met. As there is no time limit on administrative term of office, abuses might not be sanctioned - especially since the institution that manages conflicts (*Comité d'Arbitrage*) lost the confidence of some contributors. The opportunity to challenge an administrator became more and more pressing. However, a previous vote²¹ in 2006 had been concluded by the refusal of such a contesting process. As nothing is never finished on Wikipedia, the 2006 decision gave legally authorization until one contributor launches into a new debate. It did happen on August 19, 2010 when a Wikipedian created the page “*Wikipédia:Prise de décision/ Administrateur/ Contestation du statut*”. From that moment, contributors have been debating for nearly one year. But the votes have been closed on a new paradox: administrators were forced to create a “contestation page” while the modalities of this contestation had been rejected by the same voters. It means that the result of the majority vote could not be applied since there was no consensus on the details of the procedure. Yet a new “straw poll” followed to discuss these details. Votes ended on January 1, 2012. Finally, the contestation pages were implemented. For now, the confidence in several administrators have already been re-affirmed while others have been dismissed through this procedure.

The following quotation is a short extract of a narrative interview I conducted about the creation of this rule. This Wikipedian explains why he believes that administrators should be dismissed in some cases and how the new rule would solve the current problem:

¹⁸ <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikip%C3%A9dia:Si>

¹⁹ <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikip%C3%A9dia:CAA>

²⁰ An article is discussed on <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikip%C3%A9dia:Pas> when admissibility is put in question.

²¹ For more information about “straw polls” on Wikipedia, see:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Straw_poll#Definitions: polling and voting](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Straw_poll#Definitions:_polling_and_voting)

“It is not normal that User1²² cannot be questioned. In fact, with the new rule, he would be challenged right now, with the new procedure, I do not give him three months to be challenged and I’m sure about the result.”²³

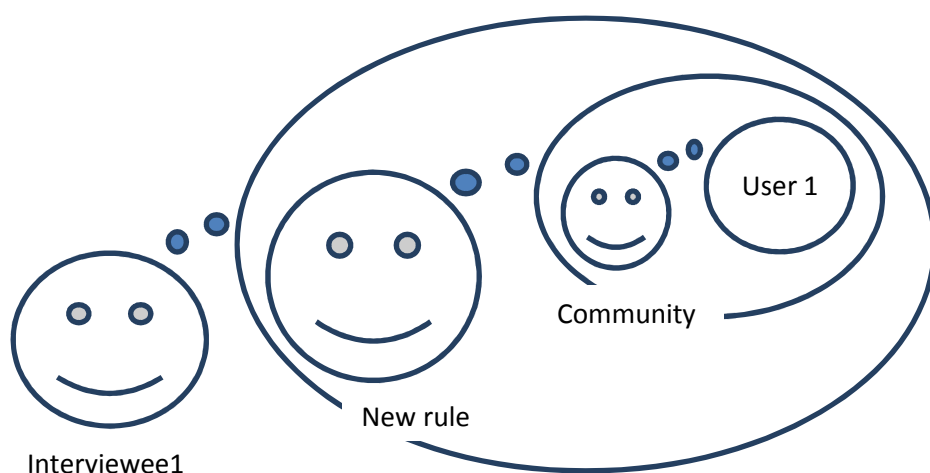
It is important to note that as the actor is speaking, he is *authoring* his own story about this event. He is thus an *agent* speaking for a first *principal*, which is the *rule*. Following Benoit-Barne and Cooren (2009), it means that in some way the rule *is acting*, like a puppet is animated by its puppeteer, text should be considered as a non-human actor and an organizational *agent* (Cooren, 2004, 2010b). However, the rule alone is not enough to contest an administrator. It has to be *seized by the collective*. In other words, the *rule* is an agent that will only act by calling for a second *principal*, which is the *community*²⁴ – here implicitly designated by the passive voice. The “community” is thus the third organizational actor involved in the action “challenging an administrator”.

To continue the metaphor of ventriloquism (Cooren, 2010a), I suggest that the rule is the puppet that acts for one organizational actor (here, the interviewee telling his story), while the rule is *in the same time* the puppeteer who uses the *community* to act. Several authority figures are thus embedded to give power and consistence to one actor’s story.

The embedded scheme can be displayed as follows. Actors are underlined ; embedment’s are in bold.

“**I think that the new procedure **allow** the community to **question** User1.”**

Fig.2



²² Wikipedia pseudonym has been anonymized. “User1” was an administrator.

²³ Our translation into English.

²⁴ The term “community” is widely used by the actors themselves

It shows that for one action such as contesting an administrator, several actors are needed. Those actors share the authority but they do not have the same weight. Without the rule, the collective cannot challenge an administrator (user 1), the rule is prior in the interaction.

The following example also displays the emplotment of authority relationships, showing the interdependence of the initiative which is individual and the application of the decision which is collective:

“Virtually anyone can challenge an administrator with minimal argument. And so there is a minimum of rules and bureaucracy. Then we can ask: why? Because in any case it is the community that finally decides.”

I think that individuals use rules which **asks for** the community to **dismiss** (administrators).

The narrator *acts for a principal* (the individuals): the interviewee makes sense of the chain of responsibilities; Individuals *act for a principal* (the rules): wikipedians have to argue according to the rules; The rules *act for a principal* (the community): the contesting rule stipulates that there will be a majority vote to decide whether the administrator will be re-affirmed or not.

Embedded authority schemes thus highlight that authority on Wikipedia is a multi-step relationship in which agents and principals legitimize themselves. As I said before, each principal (human or non-human) becomes an agent calling for another principal...till the narrative closure: “[...] *in any case it is the community that finally decides.*”

I applied the same methodology to every narrative interviews. Seven categories of authority figures appeared at the second level of the schemes:

- **Private individual:** he is acting alone, according to his own interests (which may embed those of the community). A private individual can be involved in recurrent procedures such as recent changes patrolling²⁶.
- **Individual with official status:** Administrators, bureaucrats or arbitrator. They have been elected by the community. They have special administrative tools (see *supra*).
- **Small group of individuals:** There are unofficial groups of interests. They may be *inclusionists* (meaning that they think Wikipedia should admit more entries than traditional encyclopedias) or *suppressionists* (they want a restricted encyclopedia).

²⁶ More information here : http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikip%C3%A9dia:Patrouille_RC

Other “clans” exist, built on previous conflicts, friendships, real life meetings, geographical proximity, etc.

- **Non-humans:** Non-human actors include rules, policies, recommendations and bots²⁷.
- **Large group of voters:** Consensus-based decisions are sometimes too difficult to reach when a large amount of people must express their opinion. Then, Wikipedians take decisions through a voting process. It happens for administrator applications, straw polls, surveys, etc.
- **The outside of Wikipedia:** The most influent Wikipedians hold their own blogs where they discuss Wikipedias’ issues. Some Wikipedians also chat on IRC channels, meet in real life, etc.
- **The community:** This intermental unit overlaps different realities depending on the situation but is widely used by the Wikipedians.

Those categories are not mutually exclusive. It means that an individual with an official status (e.g. an administrator) will probably act sometimes for interests that have nothing to do with this status. Reviewing the authority of the categories mentioned above, it appears that private individual initiatives are paramount.

I also pointed out two different types of organizational actions:

- **Influence and/or make a judgment:** Influence is subjective and depends on interviewee feelings expressed in the stories.
- **Effective actions:** Many actions impact the organization directly. Effective actions include: starting a debate or a straw poll, voting in favor of an administrator, protecting a page, blocking a vandal, deleting an article, etc.

A first answer to the question “Who is leading Wikipedia?” would be something like: “Highly motivated private individuals!” These *individuals* are different persons, with sometimes opposed interests. In the following extract, a wikipediaian told me his story of the creation of the rule. It illustrates how private individuals and initiatives are valued:

“[There was] a second phase, actually, where I participated less [...], where it was rather user3 and user4 who did a lot of work that has contributed to the ultimate success [of the rule], which was not obvious.”

²⁷ “Bots are automatic or semi-automatic agents that interact with Wikipedia like any user but for repetitive and tedious tasks for humans.” See <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikip%C3%A9dia:Bot>

It does not mean that *user3* and *user4* shared the same interests, but they did collaborate. They might have been each other forces of opposition. In fact, they look like “representatives” except that they have not been elected for the job. Moreover, their power is widely offset by the large groups of voters. If initiative is individual, the application of a decision must often go through a vote, and the transition between the co-construction of propositions to be voted and the vote itself takes time and fails sometimes. To become an organizational text, individual initiative must be seized (or approved more or less formally) by the *collective*. Yet, private individuals have a strong power because they are the ones who determine what people are voting about (even if propositions are compromises and do not reflect only one initiative):

“[The construction of the rule] was extended over a long period. There were preparations by user5 on his personal page. This helped identify key elements.”

Voters then approve one or another proposition, thereby confirming private initiatives.

Status actions are essentially effective. They consist in the use of maintenance tools that are sometimes perceived as a tool of power:

“Blocking is not an editorial tool, but rather a tool of power. And it is also a tool of power between admins. For example, if someone unlocks what another admin had blocked.”

This last extract shows that administrators do not necessarily share similar interests. Nevertheless, contributors with official status (like administrators) also struggle with private individuals. For example, many conflicts appear on “deletion pages” (PàS) where administrators must decide whether a page should be removed or not from the encyclopedia. They are supposed to interpret arguments from the other contributors to make their choice (it is not a majority vote). This interpretation is however very close to an editorialist choice²⁸. Depending on the administrator personality, the decision will be taken carefully or roughly and might cause a conflict. It is also important to note that the status of an administrator allows him to make this choice but it does not mean that the choice is motivated by the status (e.g. an administrator might be more inclusionnist or suppressionist).

²⁸ Contributors are currently arguing about that issue in day-to-day talks. This extract from the “bistro” illustrates the controversy:
http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikip%C3%A9dia:Bistro#Une_P.C3.A0S_.C3.A0_cl.C3.B4turer_svp

Narrative approaches help qualifying influences between *small groups of individuals*. Those influences play an undoubted role, at least in the mind of frequent contributors:

“In addition, [this contributor] is associated with certain clans - well, yes, you can call it clans - with user6 or user7 who is also of the same kind, but hey, it's a tiny group that is a little bit problematic.”

Consequently, frequent contributors act as if those influences were materialized, thereby creating the conditions for their reality. In some way, they seem to be self-fulfilling prophecies. Consequences on the encyclopedia appear when background conflicts between “clans” lead to conflicts resolution procedures with potential sanctions like blocking. Similarly, the influence of *the outside of Wikipedia* (blogs, articles in newspapers, etc.) is relative but their *potential* influence is sufficient to constitute a threat and thus to act:

“There is an element at stake in the discussion. It is that there are people who have more influence than others. And I do not have so much influence. I think one reason is that I met a few people, I'm not on IRC, I'm not there and I also never really went there, you know, on Twitter. And there are also the meetings in the real life. I think people who have influence are those who use these media.”

Non-human actions are mainly effective. One contributor stresses that bots make possible much more complicated types of votes that are also much more democratic:

“Some votes are made possible because there are computer tools to do so. Otherwise such votes would be infeasible. Robots [...] can ask the questions differently, so no more binary choices.”

Finally, voters exert effective actions. In so doing, they are a needed force of opposition and flatten strong initiatives taken by individuals. They also prevent the processes from organized action of small groups of interests. Authority on Wikipedia is thus disseminated between many actors with different ontologies that struggle in joint construction (Hardy, Palmer, & Phillips, 2000; Hardy & Phillips, 2004). As I said before, conflicts are important in *Integrated Organization Systems* (Limerick, 1976) as they are the site where the consistence of the organization is negotiated.

Authorships as constitutive of legitimate authority

The analysis reveals the multiplicity of actors involved in Wikipedia. They might be humans or non-humans, individuals or collectives ; they are tangible (like administrators) or constitute a more abstract category (like “the outside of Wikipedia”). Are they all organizational authors, according to the previous discussion? The answer will determine which categories of actors are *needed for* (and not only *involved in*) the creation of an organizational *self* (Taylor & Van Every, 2010).

As demonstrated above, there are several conditions for authorship to appear:

1. *An author carries out a project.* He is consistent with his actions, which means that he is univocal. Non-humans, large group of voters or the outside of Wikipedia all comprise intrinsic contradictions. They cannot be considered as “authors”.
2. *Authorship occurs in a transdiscursive situation.* Non-humans and large groups of participants do not interact directly on the conversational site. They might be called in arguments (like puppets) but they are not arguing by themselves.
3. *The author is responsible for his writings and can be punished.* Only human actors can be *responsible* for something. A bot, for example, which would make a mistake by deleting wrong paragraphs on one article is not responsible for that error: it cannot repair its fault, apologize, change its mind, etc.
4. *The author is valued as an individual.* Such a definition excludes from organizational authorship all kind of intermental unit (Zunshine, 2012).

Only two categories of actors fulfill the four conditions: private individuals and individuals with an official status. It confirms the results of the analysis asserting that individuals are the prevailing authority (*authorship*) on Wikipedia. Of course, these individuals do not share the same interests but this shows that personal initiative is absolutely needed in the encyclopedia. Individuals do have a very pragmatic role (they manage conflicts, create rules, participate to democratic processes, etc.) but they also struggle to *continually define the organization*. They are doing it during the organizing process itself (e.g. as they are calling for the figure “community” to back one argument) but also as they are *narrating* the organization (when they are negotiating but also when they are answering my questions). This last aspect is crucial because it explains precisely how the organization as a whole achieves its *authority*. Indeed, authors are delegated actors who speak for the organization and, doing so, who are *authoring* the organization.

In the words of Taylor and Van Every (2010):

“Yes, it is by the authoring of the perceptions and intentions of the organization (B) by someone (A), its agent, that organizational authority is established: a second-to-first relationship of the organization with all its agents, justified by a recognition of the legitimacy and authenticity of its mission and accomplished by its communicating with them.”

Of course, not all the authors have the same opinion. That is why the organizational authority is a negotiated authority and thus the result of communicative processes. CCO approaches (Communication as Constitutive of Organizations) see power relationships as activated through the interaction itself (Ashcraft et al., 2009). The conversational site allows the contributors to “bind the coorientational relationships to each other sufficiently to hold the delicate fabric of human relationships together” (Taylor, 2009).

As Wikipedia is a never finished work (Kaltenbrunner & Laniado, 2012), *what* is written and *how* it is written might be renegotiated at any time. As I highlighted before, if authorship supposes closure of meaning, this is not the case of a text without authors (or whose authors have been anonymized).

In our typology of organizational actors on Wikipedia, the category “**community**” illustrates how *authors* give birth to the organization *self* in the interaction. Indeed, singular interviewees often credit all the participants with authority, even sometimes in a roundabout way:

*“Even if the rules do not exactly correspond to what I proposed, it did not bother me **that to happen.**”*

At some point the use of passive voice or general terms like “community”, “Wikipedians” or pronouns like “we” are needed for three main reasons.

(1) First, they are used as figures backing one or another stance (Cooren, 2010b). In that sense, referring to the term “community” might be a way to rhetorically legitimize an approach of consensus based on majority votes;

(2) second, it is not always easy for one contributor to identify who is responsible for an action. Thus, the use of general terms is also a matter of convenience in the narrating situation;

(3) third, - and more significantly - general terms are needed to create a “self” from the polyphony of voices (Robichaud et al., 2004). Since there is no large group of participants whose power would not come from an individual initiative, the “I” is included into the intermental unit “contributors”, allowing everyone to identify to one decision, and thereby reducing struggles between “I” and “them”. In an horizontal organization, the authority of the whole organization must be achieved precisely because there is no formal intermediate authorities. According to Taylor and Van Every (2010), the transition from “I” to “we” is the first step in the construction of organization-as-entity, a *thriddness* (Taylor & Van Every, 2010). In this sense, the “community” should not be considered as a background but as an outcome (Taylor, 2009) and the organization not as prerequisite that allows communication but as the outcome of communication.

Conclusion

On Wikipedia, there is no manager, no formal leader or CEO²⁹. However, like in any other traditional organizations, decisions must be made. This article aimed to answer the following question: Who take decisions in organizations where there is no formal organizational chart?

To answer this question, I explored the concept of *author* and showed the connections between *authorship* and *authority*. I identified organizational authors as specific actors who take initiatives and argument to change the organization (they build rules, they manage conflicts, etc.), regardless of formal status. As interests of organizational authors are sometimes opposed, they summon other actors to support their arguments and to gain authority. Those actors might be collectives or non-humans.

Through narrative analysis, this paper asserts that authority mechanisms often imply more than the two-step process described by Benoît-Barné and Cooren (2009). I suggest that the relevant *agent-principal* relationship would also work like Matryoshka dolls: an organizational author refers to another actor that might refer to a third one and so on, till a narrative closure. This narrative closure is significant in that it includes a range of actors and excludes others. Through the emplotment (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1999), authors sort and rank authority of actors that will have to be considered prior or secondary.

The main contributions of this research consists in (1) the attempt to connect the organizational *self* with authorship mechanisms in horizontal organizations; (2) showing that

²⁹ The Wikipedia organizing is different from the non-profit organization Wikimedia that operates the project Wikipedia. Indeed, the Wikimedia Foundation is managed by a traditional board of trustees.

the organizational authority as well as the authority of organizational authors are both negotiated and used through arguments in the day-to-day interactions. This observation allows us to consider organizational micro-processes beyond general terms like “participation” or “decentralization of powers”. In so doing, this research confirms the advantage of considering communication as constitutive of organizing processes (Ashcraft et al., 2009).

In their article “*Discourse and institutions*” (2004, p.648), Phillips et al. defined authors as:

“Generators of influential texts that are aimed at influencing the nature and structure of discourses and, in turn, affecting the institutions that are supported by those discourses. »

Future researches could explore *authorship* in such a direction. Indeed, organizational authors and institutional entrepreneurs described by Czarniawska (2009) share significant similarities: they are very much involved in their organization (Czarniawska says that they “*love it*”), they take advantage of a positive zeitgeist *and* they exert a certain control – that is they take initiatives in the right place at the right time.

All organizational actors cannot be authors, even in an organization where there is no formal authority. This takes time, requires rhetorical skills, and it can be seen as a thankless job in that extent that resulting organizational texts must remain anonymous. However, to continue the metaphor of Lefkowitz (2002) and Czarniawska (2009), they are as essential for the living and the development of horizontal organizations than ants in anthill.

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